Psychiatry and Islam

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Objective: To explore psychiatry in Islam, with a view to informing Western psychiatrists working with Islamic patients, and Islamic medical students studying in Western countries.

Methods: The first necessary step was to acquire some understanding of Islam, Sharia and Sharia law, as the basis on which the available psychiatric literature was considered. Standard textbooks on Islam and English-language papers in the psychiatric literature were examined. Discussions with knowledgeable Muslim people were conducted.

Results: Islam shares roots with the other Abrahamic, monotheistic religions: Judaism and Christianity. A central issue is unity: the unity of God, unity with God and unity within the Islamic community. Islam is more than a religion, because it informs all aspects of behaviour and has been described as ‘a comprehensive way of life’. Individualism is less important than the welfare of the community. The Sharia is a list of rules and regulations derived from authentic sources. Psychiatric services in Islam, according to Western standards, are somewhat limited. This issue is being addressed through epidemiological studies, provision of new services and policy development. Although mental health legislation is not universal, forensic psychiatry has a role, in many ways similar to that in the West.

Conclusion: Islam is based on unity and core values of compassion, justice and benevolence. Islamic psychiatry has a proud early history, and advances are occurring. There is an opportunity for the profession of psychiatry to bridge religious, ethnic and cultural boundaries.

Key words: forensic psychiatry, Islam, psychiatry, Sharia.

The aim of the present paper is to explore psychiatry in Islam. Such an exploration may inform psychiatrists working in Western countries with Islamic patients, Western psychiatrists travelling to Islamic countries, and Islamic medical students studying in Western countries. Like any important issue, the role of the psychiatrist in Islam can be understood only in context.

HISTORY AND PRINCIPLES

Islam is the religion whose founder is the Prophet, Mohammed. A Muslim is an adherent of the Islamic religion. Muslims represent the majority population in 56 countries, and form more than one-fifth (1.2 billion) of the world population.

The Christian, Jewish and Islamic religions have the same roots and more similarities than differences. All believe in one (monotheistic) and the same God/Allah. All believe in the prophets Abraham and Moses.

Abraham and his wife Sarah lived in Canaan (Palestine) and were childless. When it seemed that Abraham would not have an heir, Sarah suggested he attempt to procreate with her servant, Hagar. This union produced a boy who was called Ishmael. Sarah then became pregnant herself, and gave birth to Isaac. Sarah became concerned that, as the first born, Ishmael would be the prime inheritor and eclipse her own son. Accordingly, Sarah prevailed on Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. This happened, and Hagar and Ishmael went to a location at or near where Mecca...
currently stands. The descendants of Isaac became the Hebrew tribes who became Jews and the descendants of Ishmael became the Muslims. Abraham is prominent in the Old Testament (Christian scripture); thus, these are the three ‘Abrahamic’ religions.

Muslims also believe in Adam, David, Solomon, Noah and John the Baptist. They believe in angels, heaven and hell, and the Day of Judgement. They believe that Jesus will return to Jerusalem prior to the Day of Judgement. They believe that Mary (who is mentioned more times in the Koran than the New Testament) had a virgin conception. They believe her pregnancy was a miracle, but not that Jesus was the son of God. They believe in large passages of the Torah (Jewish scripture) and the Old Testament.

Muslims believe that God revealed himself to Moses and Jesus, and that the Jews and Christians received a perfectly valid revelation, but that they deviated from the teachings. Some extant Moslem scholars believe that other people such as the Hindus and Buddhists have received their message from the same divine source.¹

In the centuries following the time of Jesus, in what is now Saudi Arabia, there had been the continuation of polytheism (belief in more than one god) and reversion to tribal practices. In this setting Mohammad was born, in 570 CE.

Mohammad was an illiterate member of a low-prestige tribe, but a respected and capable trader. He was in the habit of meditating in a desert cave near Mecca. At 40 years of age, he began to hear the words of Allah, which were transmitted to him through the archangel Gabriel. This continued for 23 years until his death in 632 CE. He remembered and recited these words to others who wrote them down, so forming the Koran (‘recitation’), the Islamic scripture. Mohammad was neither the author nor the editor, but the messenger. He is for Islam the most important prophet and inspired interpreter of the word of Allah, and the Perfect Man.

The Koran is 114 chapters, mostly arranged in order of length, the longest first. The early chapters cover many pages in English script, the late chapters less than one.

The Koran is a reminder, not a revelation of new truths. A central message is that submission to the one god results in peace. The primary act of faith is to implement Allah’s will in both private and public life. The Koran informs that responsibility to the Islamic community (united by the belief in one god) is of central importance, overriding other social, tribal, ethnic and national ties. This increases the opportunity for living according to Allah’s will, and decreases the likelihood of fighting. As the building block of community, the importance of the family is emphasized. The integration of the whole of life in a unified community gives believers ‘intimations of the Unity which is God’.²

Critics point to the disadvantages of Islamic women and claim evidence of a cruel religion. This is a discussion beyond the scope of the present paper. However, defenders point to Koranic passages promoting peace and justice, the prevention of harm and the protection of the disadvantaged.

Islam is a comprehensive way of life. Muslims believe that religion cannot be separated from social and political life, because religion informs every action a person takes. Many passages of the Koran support a strong relationship between Islam, the state and society. Thus, the secularization of the state as exists in the West is considered incompatible with Islam, and is not desired by a significant proportion of Islamic people.

Sharia means ‘the path’, and refers to the path that Muslims should follow. Sharia is a set of regulations, principles and values from which Islamic legislation and law are drawn. It is a guide to every action, and divides them into five divisions: obligatory, meritorious, permissible, reprehensible and forbidden.

In a setting of political unrest and disenchantment with leaders, Abu Hanifah (699–767 CE) began collecting information leading to the formulation of the Sharia. Thus, this legal system began as a protest movement, an attempt to rebuild society and establish compassion and social justice.

Sharia law provides the guidelines and requirements for two types of interactions: those between humans and Allah (worship); and those between humans (social transactions). Classical Sharia manuals are divided into four sets of laws concerned with worship, commercial dealings, marriage and divorce, and penal laws.

The are four main roots or sources of Sharia.

(1) The Koran details the manner in which Allah should be worshipped, but is not a comprehensive code of law. It sets out general and ethical principles that guide all aspects of Islamic life. It does provide rules on a range of matters including modesty, marriage, divorce, inheritance, intoxicants, gambling, feuding, diet, theft, murder and adultery. Certain crimes (hudud) are listed, along with the appropriate punishments. However, it does not help with a range of other issues. Accordingly, because Mohammed was considered the Perfect Man and the most inspired interpreter of the Koran, his behaviour and utterances are taken as additional source information.

(2) The Sunna includes all the known sayings and actions of Mohammed, his decisions, and his responses to life situations and to philosophical and legal questions. Six collections of Sunna that were written in the 9th and 10th centuries are accepted as authoritative.
(3) Analogy (qiya) is a source of rules, when direct instruction cannot be found in the Koran or the Sunna. For example, the Koran forbids the use of wine, because of the threat intoxication poses to the Islamic community. By analogy, the use of any intoxicant is banned.

(4) Consensus (ijma) among scholars may also be taken as law. Ijma follows from Mohammed’s statement, ‘My community will never agree on an error’, which is taken to mean that if all agreed, a law could be safely made.

Sharia law is unique in that the texts are of divine rather than of human origin, and substantial parts of it can never be modified. However, independent conscience and reasoning (ijtihad) has been used to make law. Ijtihad has, at times, been acceptable only to a proportion of Islam.

Differences exist between the major law schools, reflecting the diverse geographical, social, historical and cultural contexts in which the respective jurists were writing. For example, the Shi`a, an influential minority (who believe that succession to the political and religious leadership of the community should be hereditary through Mohammad’s daughter, Fatima) accept the Koran, Sunna and their recollections of Ali (Mohammad’s cousin and son-in-law) and other authority figures. The Sunni, the majority of Muslims (who believe that succession to leadership should belong to the most qualified and pious person, and not blood relationship) do not hold Ali in the same regard. Nevertheless, there is close agreement on Sharia across Islam.

There are two groups of crime/punishment. The hudud, mentioned earlier, are specific crimes, which are considered attacks against Allah and social order. They attract specific hudud punishments such as stoning, flogging and amputation, as described in the Koran (see later). The other group is the tazir, which attract punishments such as imprisonment and fines, as decided by a judge (qadi).

The Western media has made mention of blood-money, amputation and stoning. The judicial systems and the relative importance placed on the different roots of Sharia vary throughout Islam. Blood-money is compensation paid by a murderer or his/her family to the family of murdered individuals, and is listed in the Koran. Supporters state that this mechanism overcomes the need for capital punishment, does not injure the perpetrator’s family in the same way as do the alternatives, reduces the need for expensive prisons and gives something back to the surviving relatives. Amputation of the hand of the thief is a matter of debate. Some translations of the Koran (5:38) state only that ‘the hand is cut’ or ‘marked’ and not removed. The most commonly available English-language translation of the Koran in Australia, however, does use the words ‘cut off’. The principle of compensation also applies in theft, and if the thief can provide goods or undertake work for the victim, this course may be taken. Stoning to death has been considered a punishment for married adulterers. However, on this point there is a difference between the Koran and the Sunna (example set by Mohammad). The Koran (24:2) makes no mention of stoning, but states that the appropriate punishment is 100 strokes of a whip in public. The public nature of the whipping is to shame the offender, and provide an example to the audience. The strokes may be applied symbolically. Stoning appears in the Sunna literature and was ordered by Mohammad in adultery. This is one of the relatively rare instances of disagreement between the Koran and the Sunna, and is the cause of much discussion.

Sharia law has been replaced in part, in most of Islam, by the impositions of colonialists. Saudi Arabia applies the most pure form. In Egypt, the majority of Muslims would like to see Sharia as the law of the land, whereas in Turkey (the first and only state in the Islamic world to claim secularism), only 3% are of this view. Nasr believes there is a desire by the majority of Muslims ‘to preserve their religious and cultural identity, to reapply the Divine Law that was replaced by European legal codes ...’. Commonly, states embrace a combination of Western and Sharia law, ‘a weird mixture of medieval family law and an alien commercial and civil law’.

COMMON FEATURES OF ISLAMIC CULTURE

Culture is influenced by history, place and time. Although different groups experience different influences, Islamic cultures around the world share common features. These include the following: (i) family interdependence and loyalty are strongly encouraged; (ii) societies are mainly patriarchal and hierarchal and keenly support deference to authority; (iii) these are relatively collectivist societies in which the individual’s behaviour is determined more by norms, roles and goals of their collective, than by personal attitudes, perceived rights and dislikes; and (iv) traditional values are emphasized in favour of social constancy, and cultural change is perceived as threat.

MENTAL HEALTH AND SERVICES IN ISLAMIC SOCIETIES

The first psychiatric hospitals of the world were probably built in Arab cities: Baghdad in 705 CE, Cairo in 800 CE and Damascus in 1270 CE. In Turkey, special psychiatric wards were built onto a general hospital in 1555 and a specific psychiatric hospital was built in 1583. The great Muslim physicians include al-Razi (d. 925) who wrote a 24-volume encyclopedia of medicine and who treated psychiatric patients, and Ibn Sina (Avicenna; d 1037) who
wrote the 14-volume *The Cannons of Medicine*, which was used in the West for 700 years. Ibn Sina rejected the notion that mental illness was caused by evil spirits (*jinn*). Because there are more than 50 Islamic states, there is no satisfactory single description of mental health services possible. Little English language information is available. The first modern psychiatric hospital in the Middle East was the Roozbeh Psychiatric Hospital, in Tehran, Iran, which opened in 1937 and which was staffed by two European trained psychiatrists.

In some Islamic states, the promise suggested by the auspicious beginnings, mentioned earlier, have not persisted. In Saudi Arabia, the popular view is that mental illness is the punishment of Allah or inflicted by evil spirits. There are some regions providing advanced treatments but other treatments include cauterization, beatings and exorcism. Before 1950 there were no proper arrangements for mentally ill patients, and they were warehoused in residential houses. The first modern psychiatric hospital in Saudi Arabia was built in 1962. The picture is similar in Pakistan, where the majority believe mental illness is caused by demonic possession. ‘Patients are still kept in bondage – chained, beaten, parts of their bodies burnt.’

Murad and Gordon, however, report that ‘Psychiatry in contemporary Arab societies is well established...’ Malaysia is pushing ahead with major policy reform in mental health, including mental health legislation and attention to the quality of services. Mental health services in Egypt are receiving active attention. Lebanon prepared a national mental programme in 1987, but progress has been slow. There are two large mental hospitals, which are full to capacity most of the time, and only 1.2 psychiatrists per 100 000 population. Kuwait and Bahrain had large custodial hospitals that have, to a large extent, been replaced by more progressive psychiatric services. Qatar (population 500 000) has never had a dedicated psychiatric hospital and services have been provided through psychiatric wards attached to general hospitals.

Iran (population 60 million) has a range of psychiatric services and a dozen universities graduate 50 psychiatrists each year. A recent Iranian study, which sampled 35 000 individuals, found the prevalence of mental disorders to be compatible with international studies. A World Health Organization (WHO) study of depression in different cultures around the world showed the clinical features of patients in Tehran to be similar to those elsewhere. Post-traumatic stress disorder has been reported in survivors of the Iran–Iraq war and in response to the Bam earthquake.

In Malaysia, depression and anxiety commonly present as somatic symptoms. Obsessive–compulsive disorder is most frequently associated with religious rituals and observances. In the Arab Gulf communities, somatization and dissociative symptoms are common psychiatric conditions, and in Saudi Arabia, Munchausen’s syndrome by proxy is probably the leading form of child abuse.

Drug and alcohol use are offences that attract severe punishments. The Koran proscribes 80 lashes, to which may be added penalties determined by local authorities, but charges rarely proceed against those who seek help. Severe punishments exist for dealers and distributors. Specialized hospitals and services for the treatment of substance and alcohol addiction can be found in Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Suicide is a crime under Islamic law and attempts may lead to prosecution. Nevertheless, it remains a major problem for Turkey, Uzbekistan and other central Asian countries. The suicide of a young Muslim was reported in Australia. The authors observed that the family was rejected by the local Islamic community because of the stigma associated with this event.

Malaysia, Egypt, Iran and many other Islamic states have active university departments of psychiatry that provide high-quality inpatient and outpatient services to mentally ill and substance-addicted persons. In Iraq, medical ethics is a prominent subject at the University of Basra.

**FORENSIC PSYCHIATRY IN ISLAM**

Again, the large number of Islamic states and the very limited amount of English-language information makes a comprehensive statement difficult. Kutaiba Chaleby has provided the first English-language monograph on forensic psychiatry in Islamic jurisprudence.

*Mens rea* (guilty intent) is well accepted as necessary for guilt, and there is no crime where there is no intention. The Prophet Mohammed regarded the young, the sleeping person and the ‘insane’ as being free of guilt for acts they may commit. In the West it was not until the 15th century that the first insanity acquittal was recorded; Islamic law was dealing with the issue in the 7th and 8th centuries. *Insanity* (*junun*) in Islamic law is determined by the court on psychiatric advice. ‘Insanity’ has not been universally defined, but generally it takes the form of ‘impairment of the mind, where it prevents action and speech from operating on reason, except rarely’. In Turkey, when a significant psychiatric disorder is believed to have contributed to the commission of a serious crime, the perpetrator is sentenced to a specially guarded section of a mental hospital and treated for at least 1 year.

Islamic law recognizes sudden perplexity (*da'hish*), which may also be translated as ‘startled’ or ‘stunned’. This is associated with sudden loss of reason and, according to some schools of jurisprudence, with
respect to criminal responsibility, should be dealt with along the same lines as insanity.27

Competence to stand trial involves the psychiatrist.28 Islamic justice principles hold that the defendant should have the same access to the judge as the plaintiff, and this may be impaired by mental illness.

Most Arab countries have no mental health law as such, or they have only remnants from the colonial period. In Saudi Arabia, the mentally ill were assigned a guardian who had to agree to confinement or treatment.7

Under Islamic law, dangerousness need not be a major issue in involuntary hospitalization; the emphasis is not on protection of liberty, but the provision of care.27 Throughout Islamic history, the state has had the authority to take over a person’s financial affairs under the principle of Al-Hajjer. This is relevant when the person is behaving with extreme folly (safahah), such as squandering money. Hajjer is declared by a judge if an individual is acting contrary to his own best interests, irrespective of the presence of mental illness. However, Hajjer does not affect the individual’s ability to manage other personal affairs. If this principle is extended by analogy (qiya) to involuntary hospitalization, it can mean the involuntary hospitalization of drug- and alcohol-addicted persons and those with psychopathic personality.

In Turkey, it is considered that people who cannot control their behaviour cannot practice their rights. Article 89 of the Turkish Civic Law states that only people with reason have the right to get married. Article 112 states that if a husband or wife was suffering from a psychiatric disorder at the time of marriage, the marriage can be considered invalid.

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Islamic law, being concerned with family and community, has prescriptive rules regarding inheritance. An individual can leave only one-third of his estate to interests outside his natural heirs. The law does not recognize a will that has been written by a mentally incompetent individual. The test of mental competence to make a will is yet to be fully defined.

As aforementioned, although suicide is illegal, it does occur. In some places, rules, regulations and hospital polices have been established that limit confidentiality, such that attempts can be reported to police.28 Recent reports from Central Asia describe a harsh economic climate and a dramatic rise in suicide. In Kyrgyzstan, a Muslim leader recently decreed that those who suicide may receive religious rites at their burials, and this represents a departure from Islamic law.28

Although penal and commercial law have been circumvented to some extent by Western thought, Islamic family law has generally remained in force.29 In divorce, in general, Islamic law will place a child under the age of 7 years with the mother.28 After 7 years of age, the father will have the right to custody. There are some gender factors: a male child may choose which parent he goes to, irrespective of age, a female child does not have that choice. The father remains the guardian, wherever the child is living. The best interests of the child are considered and psychiatrists may be provide information on the mental health of parents and the most appropriate placement of children.

Islam very strongly supports confidentiality. Some authorities believe that if physicians are pressured in court to break confidentiality, they are permitted to give false testimony without being punished by Allah.28 The Islamic legal system recognizes the principle of the expert witness. However, only a Muslim can testify in court against a Muslim defendant. and it follows (qiya) that a psychiatrist should be a Muslim if presenting an opinion about a Muslim patient.

For centuries, the responsibilities of the physician have been clearly defined. Liability for malpractice exists in a wide range of circumstances, including intentional harm, unintentional harm, violation of professional standards, ignorance, treatment without consent, deception, refusal of treatment, and breach of confidentiality.27

DISCUSSION

Islam is the predominant religion in more than 50 non-English speaking states, and encompasses many different ethnic groups. There is a limited amount of information about psychiatry in these regions in the English language. The aim to examine psychiatry in Islam may therefore be considered unduly ambitious. Our approach has been to provide as comprehensive a coverage of Islam as space allows, to provide a contextual base on which the available information on psychiatry can be laid.

There a number of points of interest. The roots of Christianity, Judaism and Islam (the three Abrahamic religions) are intertwined. Islam accepts much of the Torah and the Gospels, that Jesus was a true prophet, and that Mary had a miracle virgin pregnancy.

The Koran is believed to be the direct word of God/Allah, spoken to an illiterate man who recited what he was told, in the 7th century. The Sharia (‘the path’) and consequent Sharia law is a set of principles and regulations, arising from academic work, which arose as a result of discontent with the Umayyad government (661–750 CE).28 They ruled autocratically and were seen to contravene the scriptures. Thus, Islamic jurisprudence began as a protest movement, a desire to return to true Islamic principles.

Central to Islam is the notion of unity. This is a complex matter with many facets, including that there is only one god, and there is only one religion.
(the prophets who came before Muhammad carried the same message from the same god, but the message was unclear or lost). There should also be unity between all Muslims and, importantly, the believer should seek unity with Allah. Submission to and unity with Allah will result in peace. Unity with Allah means behaving in the manner laid down in the Sharia. Islam therefore is not simply a religion, but a way of life.

The quest for unity underlies many of the laws of the Koran. Activities that might disrupt the Islamic community and the basic building block, the family, are punished. These include adultery, gambling and alcohol consumption. The shrouding of women and the laws of inheritance also attach to preservation of the community and family.

Although Islam established psychiatric hospitals as early as 705 CE, and although at least one prominent 11th century physician (Ibn Sina Avicenna, d. 1037) published important information on the nature of psychiatric disorders, psychiatric services in Islamic states, by Western standards, are limited. This is being addressed through epidemiological studies, the provision of new services and policy development.

Mental Health Legislation, by Western standards, is in the process of development. Nevertheless, forensic psychiatry has a place in Islam. The ability of an individual to stand trial is considered, and the insanity defense is recognized. Involuntary hospitalization is achieved through a legal process. Here, the emphasis is not on the protection of liberty, which is considered to have abandoned some needy patients to the streets, but on the provision of care. Psychiatric opinion is sought if divorce is based on psychiatric disorder, and psychiatrists may be involved in the assessment of children when custody is in question.

Islam was disrupted by the Crusades, colonialism, imperialism and, now, modernity and the powerful secular world. There is a desire held by a sizable proportion of Muslims for the retention and resuscitation of traditional teachings and the core values of compassion, justice and benevolence that characterize all world faiths, including Islam.

Like Islam, the profession of psychiatry cuts across ethnic and national boundaries. The profession can make a contribution to world peace through thoughtful respect, inclusion and cooperation.

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